THE HISTORY OF ROCK

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ROCK at the MOVIES

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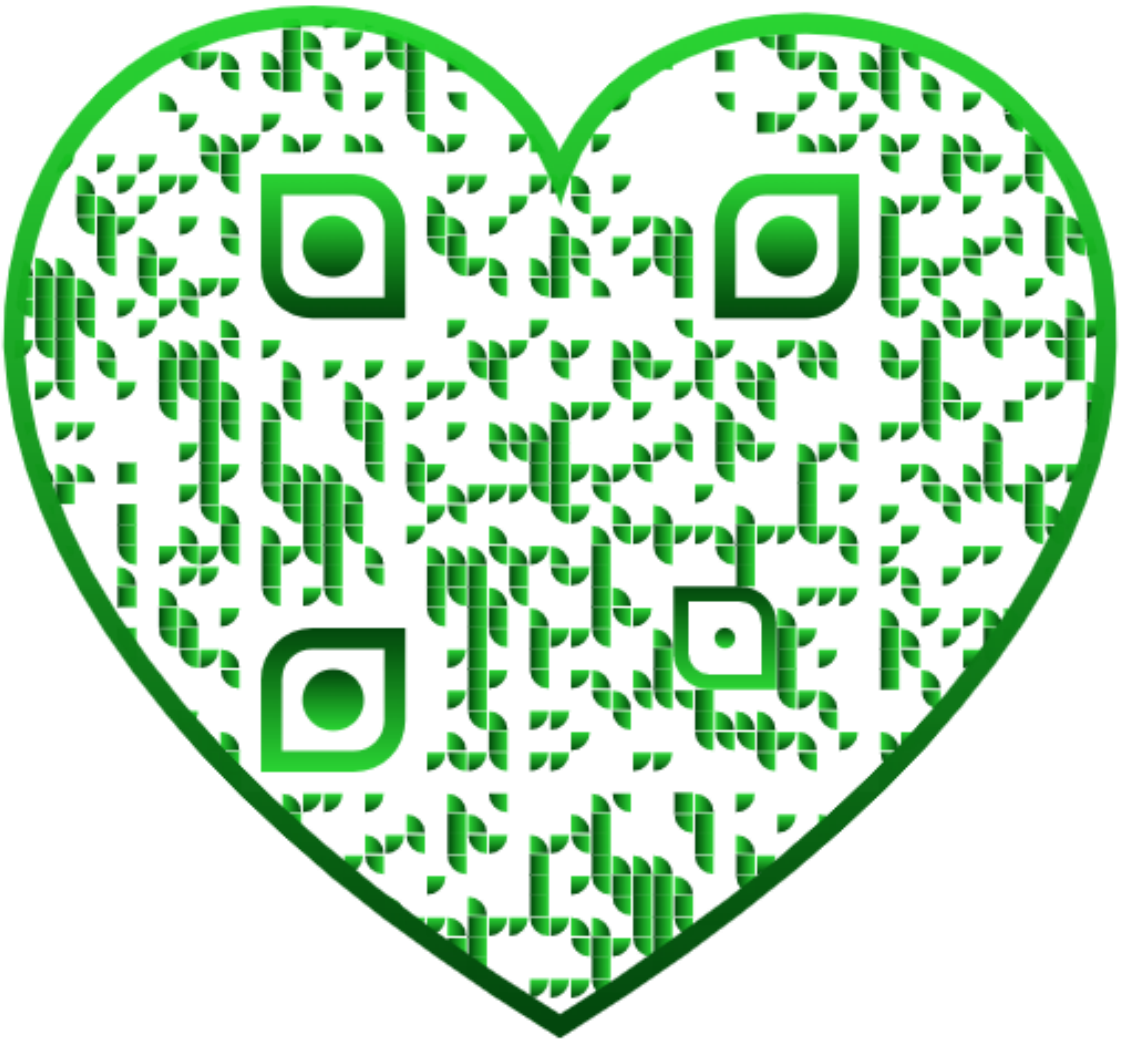

THE HISTORY OF ROCK

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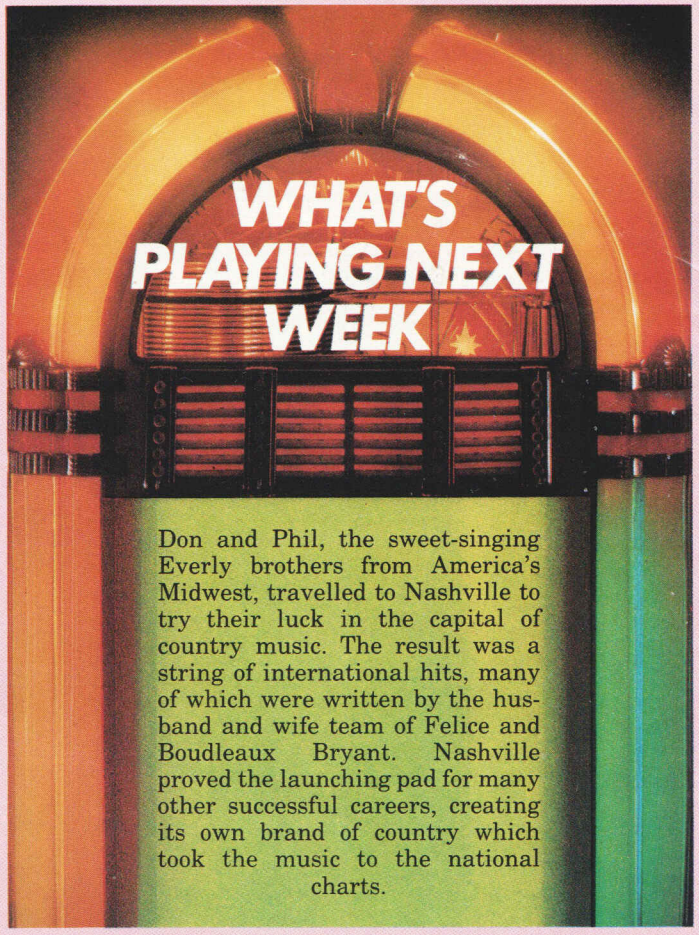

Don and Phil, the sweet-singing Everly brothers from America's Midwest, travelled to Nashville to try their luck in the capital of country music. The result was a string of international hits, many of which were written by the husband and wife team of Felice and Boudleaux Bryant. Nashville proved the launching pad for many other successful careers, creating its own brand of country which took the music to the national charts.

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Rock spreads its wings

Money, music and the media as rock boomed in the late Fifties

ROCK'N'ROLL was a music whose impact inevitably had influence on areas of life and entertainment outside the recording business itself. The American entertainment industry was prepared to exploit any potential new source of income, while rock's growth was so swift that it was bound to push into new areas. Sometimes this expansion was greeted enthusiastically, but it met frequent resistance from established institutions which were unable to cope with the new music.

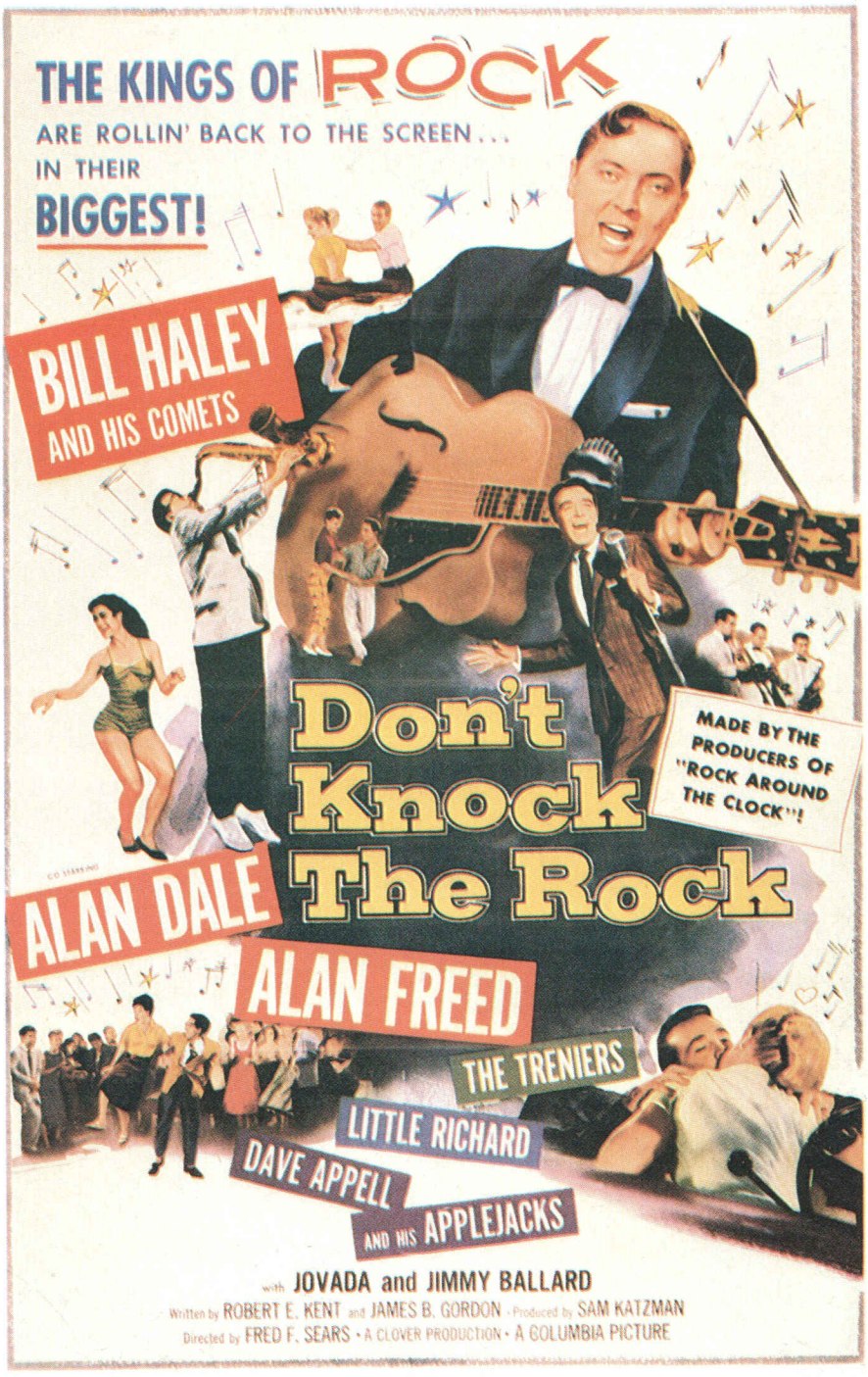
The first area which rock influenced was the film industry. Hollywood was a declining force in the mid Fifties; the competition of television was steadily draining the vitality out of what had been the most important representative of American culture in the first half of this century. The national success of rock and the fact that it was performed by young, good-looking musicians made it natural for the film industry to see potential in the music. The element of teenage revolt inherent in rock had been dealt with, in films before 1956, with some success (*The Wild One* and *Rebel Without A Cause*), and Bill Haley's national success had even been precipitated by the use of 'Rock Around The Clock' in *Blackboard Jungle*, another film about juvenile delinquency and teenage problems.

So Hollywood, after some initial caution, was very ready to accept rock. Unfortunately, the rock films (*Rock Rock Rock*, *Don't Knock The Rock* and the rest) which appeared in the mid to late Fifties were embarrassingly inept. Rock fans may have enjoyed seeing their heroes performing but the banal plots and condescending treatment of the musicians made the results interesting for historical rather than artistic reasons. The films contained neither the sustained informative content of documentary treatment, nor the substance of that artificial but often satisfying form the musical, of which Hollywood had produced so many fine examples. The basic problem was that an ageing Hollywood was unable to comprehend a young music, and could find no new forms in which to present it.

Elvis on film

Elvis Presley made the most successful transition to films. There have been many criticisms of his movies – especially his work in the Sixties – but it is undeniable that some of the early ones reached far greater heights than any other rock films of the Fifties. As a solo star, Elvis could be slotted into formulas at which Hollywood excelled; so the treatment of *King Creole* as a straightforward musical and the arrangement of the title song of *Jailhouse Rock* as a big production number worked extremely well. The difficulty was, of course, that Elvis had very limited acting talents and his inability to play conventional character parts resulted in the undemanding nature and consequent tedium of the later films. Nevertheless, Presley's films did make enormous amounts of money, and were perhaps the most obvious example of rock expanding into other areas of entertainment.

Another part of rock's spreading impact was the growing attention paid to individuals who were not musicians but were closely tied to the world of rock. Disc jockeys had been popular since the Thirties; men like Symphony Sid had often been better known than the jazzmen



A poster for Don't Knock The Rock. *Like many early rock'n'roll films,* Don't Knock The Rock *had little plot and was built around a package of stars.*

Above: Elvis leads the 'Jailhouse Rock' song-and-dance routine in the film of the same name. Jailhouse Rock *was Elvis' third film and helped establish him as a major box-office attraction. Right: Rock'n'roll under scrutiny – Oren Harris, Chairman of the House Subcommittee, holds a press conference during the payola hearings.*

they introduced. And in the early Fifties, the activities of such personalities as Hunter Hancock had made certain disc jockeys cult figures. But nothing before had approached the importance given to such media figures as Alan Freed and Dick Clark in the late Fifties. Their faces were known throughout the country; they had enormous power and they were prepared to use it to further their own ends. They made as much money as they could out of the music, and they were the prime symbols of the most important areas into which rock expanded: radio and television, the most important of the mass media.

Music and the media

American TV had been wary of rock; it had seen it as a way of boosting ratings by inviting rock stars on to shows (Elvis' appearance on the Ed Sullivan show in 1956, for example) but it did not produce anything as innovative as the British '6.5 Special' or 'Oh Boy'. The musicians themselves, of course, wanted to appear on the shows – Elvis' appearance with the Dorsey brothers and Jerry Lee Lewis' spot on the Steve Allen show were very important in their respective careers – but such outlets were comparatively infrequent. The nearest thing to the British rock shows was Dick Clark's 'American Bandstand', networked from Philadelphia, but this was more of a teenage dance programme with spots for up-and-coming talent.

The importance of television for rock was not so much in specific shows, or appearances by the stars, as in the general acceptance of rock which television represented. The US was becoming a culture in which television was by far the most important medium of mass communication, and television absorbed rock in all sorts of minor ways.

Domestic comedies – 'I Love Lucy' and the like – portrayed rock'n'roll as a normal part of youth culture; talent shows – Arthur Godfrey's for example – featured rock groups as well as comedians and crooners, and rock was often in the news bulletins. Television made rock seem a normal part of the national culture, but achieved this through a steady accumulation

of background factors rather than in a few leading programmes.

Radio was another matter, of course, and had always been an important part of the rock world: local radio stations had beamed the music in its infancy, and the bigger stations were unable to ignore it in the late Fifties. But rock's growing importance for radio highlighted a major problem in the expansion of the music. For not only did the new music inevitably affect the established entertainment industries; it also inevitably affected the economics of entertainment. It was based on new record labels, whose records appealed to a new, younger, segment of the record-buying public. And the way these records could sell in sudden surges after having been played on a radio station led, almost inevitably, to the scandal known as payola.

Buying the airwaves

The payola hearings before the House Subcommittee actually took place in 1960, but the pressure had been building up long before; the money involved in rock had begun to circulate ever faster, adding to the already widespread dubious practices in music promotion.

Payola was defined as bribing a disc jockey to play a record; but an examination of the events leading up to the hearings reveals that the whole entertainment industry was involved in corruption of some kind, and that the favours received by disc jockeys were just a small part of this. Why the payola scandal took the form it did is plain; rock had moved into radio in a big way, but the manner in which it was forcing its way in had an economic side which established corporations found difficult to accommodate. There was inevitably a reaction.

In the late Fifties, then, rock was spreading its wings; it found it easy to move into the film industry, because there it presented no threat, and was seen as a lifeline by ailing Hollywood. When it pushed hard into radio and TV, however, it ran up against vested interests and the payola investigations were the most obvious manifestation of this conflict.

ASHLEY BROWN

Left: Despite the worried look, Ed Sullivan did well out of rock'n'roll and, unlike a number of music presenters, he was not implicated in the payola scandal. Below: Alan Freed examines a pile of fan mail at the height of his fame in the late Fifties.

ROCK '58

1958 was the year Jerry Lee Lewis undertook his ill-fated tour of Great Britain with a 13-year-old bride; when novelties like 'Witch Doctor', 'Purple People Eater' and 'The Chipmunk Song' raced up the charts; but nothing seemed to stop the power of Elvis Presley to generate record-breaking sales of albums, singles and EPs, despite his call-up to the US Army.

New stars like Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers introduced a novel subtlety into pop music, while there was a continuous stream of teenage idols, each prettier than the last. The US boasted Frankie Avalon and Ricky Nelson, while in Britain Terry Dene seemed destined to be a big star until personal problems and call-up into the army damaged his prospects. Established British rockers Marty Wilde and Tommy Steele were both threatened by the sudden and sensational rise of Cliff Richard and his group the Drifters (later re-named the Shadows) in the closing months of the year.

It was a year when many of the first generation of rock fans left school, and when young musicians like the Quarrymen in Liverpool and Bob Dylan in the USA were gaining their first experience playing for audiences. Amplifiers began to get bigger and more sophisticated and guitars more expensive.

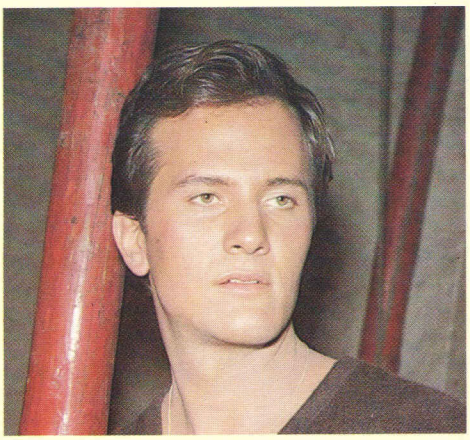
The stars seemed to get younger. British singer Laurie London, aged 14, had a million-selling Number 2 US hit with 'He's Got The Whole World In His Hands' and Jackie Dennis, a 15-year-old from Edinburgh, charted with 'Lah Dee Dah'. Record sales boomed as LPs and microgroove 45 rpm singles overtook the old 78s, mainstay of the industry for 40 years.

JANUARY

1 Elvis Presley's call-up into the US Army, due on 20 January, is deferred for two months to enable him to complete the filming of *King Creole*.
Alan Freed's show at the Paramount Theatre in New York features Paul Anka, Jerry Lee, Fats Domino and the Crickets.
7 Jack Good's '6.5 Special Stage Show', a spin-off from the BBC-TV series, goes on tour with compere Pete Murray.
10 Ricky Nelson has Top Ten hit with 'Stood Up' in US charts.
Jerry Lee Lewis' 'Great Balls Of Fire' Number 1 in UK.
17 Danny and the Juniors' 'At The Hop' Number 1 in USA.
18 Buddy Holly's 'Peggy Sue' reaches Number 4 in UK.
24 'Jailhouse Rock' by Elvis Presley is the first record to go straight to Number 1 on first week of release since commencement of British music chart in 1952. The record had advance orders of 250,000.

FEBRUARY

3 *Disc Jockey Jamboree* rock'n'roll movie released featuring Fats Domino, Charlie Gracie, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis.
Pink haired singer Wee Willie Harris is discovered in Soho and launched on the Decca label.
Marty Wilde deputises for Terry Dene in variety at Norwich Gaumont after Dene is fined £155 by Gloucester magistrates for causing wilful damage. Dene later sees a psychiatrist.
10 Chantels' 'Maybe' and Frankie Avalon with 'Dede Dinah' enter US charts.
14 Pat Boone stars in movie *April Love* and Tommy Sands in *Sing Boy Sing*.
Royal Teens in US charts with 'Short Shorts'.
24 New entries in US chart include Chuck Berry's 'Sweet Little Sixteen', Pat Boone's 'It's Too Soon To Know', and the Four Preps with 'Twenty-Six Miles'.



Pat Boone, star of the film April Love.

MARCH

1 Paul Anka starts UK tour.
2 Buddy Holly and the Crickets play their first British date at the Trocadero, Elephant and Castle, and record an appearance on the 'Sunday Night at the London Palladium' TV show on the following day.
3 Johnny Cash enters US chart with 'Ballad Of A Teenage Queen'.
Connie Francis has hit with 'Who's Sorry Now?' at Number 4 in US chart.
8 Gary Numan born, London.
Sales of Elvis Presley's 'Hound Dog' exceed five million.
Rank Organisation announce intention of starting a record company, to be called Top Rank.
Buddy Holly trio given rave reviews at their London concert: 'How these boys manage to make such a big, big sound with such limited instrumentation baffles me,' says reviewer.
15 BBC-TV relays a '6.5 Special' show 'live' from Paris.
Folk clubs boom in England and America.
17-year-old Bob Dylan switches from electric to acoustic guitar after hearing record by singer Odetta.
20 Elvis Presley reports for duty with US Army.
Marvin Rainwater hits UK chart with 'Whole Lotta Woman'.
24 John Zacherle hits with 'Dinner With Drac' in US chart.
Terry Dene movie *The Golden Disc* opens at the Rialto cinema, Piccadilly.
31 Crickets' 'Maybe Baby' Number 18 in US chart.

APRIL

4 Tommy Steele is 'waxed' by London's Madame Tussaud's gallery.
Champs' 'Tequila' in US chart.
11 Fats Domino's 'The Big Beat' Number 20 in UK chart.
14 Don Gibson hits with 'Oh Lonesome Me' in US ratings.
Broadway 'Kat' snare drum and cymbal on sale at £10 14s 0d: 'Just the set-up for skiffle and rock drummers.'
RCA release *Elvis's Golden Records* LP.
Johnny Otis Show on four-week tour of Britain.
Jazz and blues world mourns death of composer W.C. Handy.

Laurie London, a pop star at 14.

British record reviewer says Chuck Berry's 'Sweet Little Sixteen' is 'very ordinary with nothing catchy about it'.
Manchester magistrates ban skiffle. Drummers are forbidden to use washboards at Belle Vue venue.
18 Laurie London hits Number 1 in US with 'He's Got The Whole World In His Hands'.
25 David Seville has hit with 'Witch Doctor' in US.
Elvis Presley at Number 4 in US with 'Wear My Ring Around Your Neck.'

MAY
2 South African kwela dance craze arrives in Britain with Elias and his Zig Zag Jive Flutes' hit 'Tom Hark'.
5 Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode' climbs US chart.
Paul Anka's 'Crazy Love' Number 19 in US.
Tommy Steele has hair ripped and shirt torn on stage at Dundee's Caird Hall, is knocked out by fans and rescued by manager Larry Parnes.
9 Chuck Berry's 'Sweet Little Sixteen' enters UK chart.
Ballad singer Dickie Valentine calls for 'the death of rock'n'roll'.
18 Toyah Willcox born King's Heath, Birmingham.
19 Four Preps' hit 'Big Man' enters US chart.
23 Terry Dene's 'Stairway Of Love' at Number 16 in UK chart.
30 Reviewer says that Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode' 'proves there's plenty of life left in the old rock'n'roll'.

JUNE
6 Sheb Wooley's novelty record 'Purple People Eater' Number 1 in the US.
Buddy Holly and the Crickets' 'Rave On' released in UK.
20 Lonnie Donegan first British artist to sign an independent American record deal with the Dot label.

Jerry Lee Lewis and his teenage wife, Myra, during their British tour which ended prematurely in May.

Question asked in the House of Commons about the recent visit of Jerry Lee Lewis with a 13-year-old child bride to Britain. 'We have enough rock and rollers of our own without importing them,' says MP Sir Frank Medlicotte.
30 Bobby Darin's 'Splish Splash' enters US chart.
Elvis Presley enters US chart with 'Hard Headed Woman'.

JULY
10 Kate Bush born at Welling, Kent.
11 Coasters' 'Yakety Yak' Number 1 in US chart.
Kalin Twins hit with 'When' in US chart.
LP sales jump, and it is predicted that 78 rpm discs will be redundant within two years.
Loyal fans push Little Richard back into UK chart with 'Ooh My Soul' at Number 23.
15 John Lennon's mother killed in Liverpool road accident.
25 Duane Eddy's 'Rebel Rouser' at Number 7 in US chart.
Marty Wilde's 'Endless Sleep' at Number 9 in UK chart.

AUGUST
1 Bobby Darin's 'Splish Splash' Number 28 in UK chart.
Bill Haley and the Comets drop completely out of all charts after two years.
8 New teenage singer Cliff Richard signed by Norrie Paramor to Columbia, and is snapped up by producer Jack Good to appear in the first of his ITV 'Oh Boy!' shows due in September. Cliff, aged 17, releases first single 'Schoolboy Crush', backed by 'Move It'.
22 Kalin Twins' 'When' Number 1 in UK chart.
Everly Brothers at Number 3 in US chart with 'Bird Dog'.
Olympics enter US chart at Number 14 with 'Western Movies'.
Elvis Presley attends funeral of his mother in Memphis and says 'Oh God, everything I have is gone.'
29 Buddy Holly at Number 17 in UK chart with 'Early In The Morning'.
Poni Tails hit with 'Born Too Late' in US chart.
George Harrison joins the Quarrymen at a gig at the Casbah Club, Liverpool.

SEPTEMBER
1 Eddie Cochran's 'Summertime Blues' doing well in US chart.
5 *Daily Mirror* critic Patrick Doncaster says of Cliff Richard: 'Cliff has personality to win success in disc-land.'
12 Cliff Richard enters UK chart with 'Move It', which the public prefer to the A-side.
Producer Jack Good asks Cliff Richard to shave off his sideburns 'to be more original'.
13 ITV launch 'Oh Boy!' series, starring Cliff Richard.
Bobby Day's 'Rockin' Robin' at Number 2 in US chart.
29 Chuck Berry hits US chart with 'Carol' at Number 18.
Tommy Edwards' 'It's All In The Game' US Number 1 hit.

OCTOBER
3 The Westminster 10-watt, five-valve amplifier marketed by Watkins of Balham for £19 10s. It has a 10-inch speaker, has sunken controls mounted on the top and a built-in tremolo device is £5 extra. A 20-watt model is available at £30.
Cliff Richard is voted 'New Star' in *New Musical Express* reader's poll.
Elvis Presley starts Army service in Germany.
10 Marty Wilde is withdrawn from ITV's 'Oh Boy!' show after his manager Larry Parnes protests that producer Jack Good is developing 'a virtually unknown artist', Cliff Richard.
17 After only two months in show business, Cliff Richard starts package touring with the Kalin Twins, and is signed to star in film *Serious Charge*.
20 Applejacks hit US chart with 'Mexican Hat Rock'.

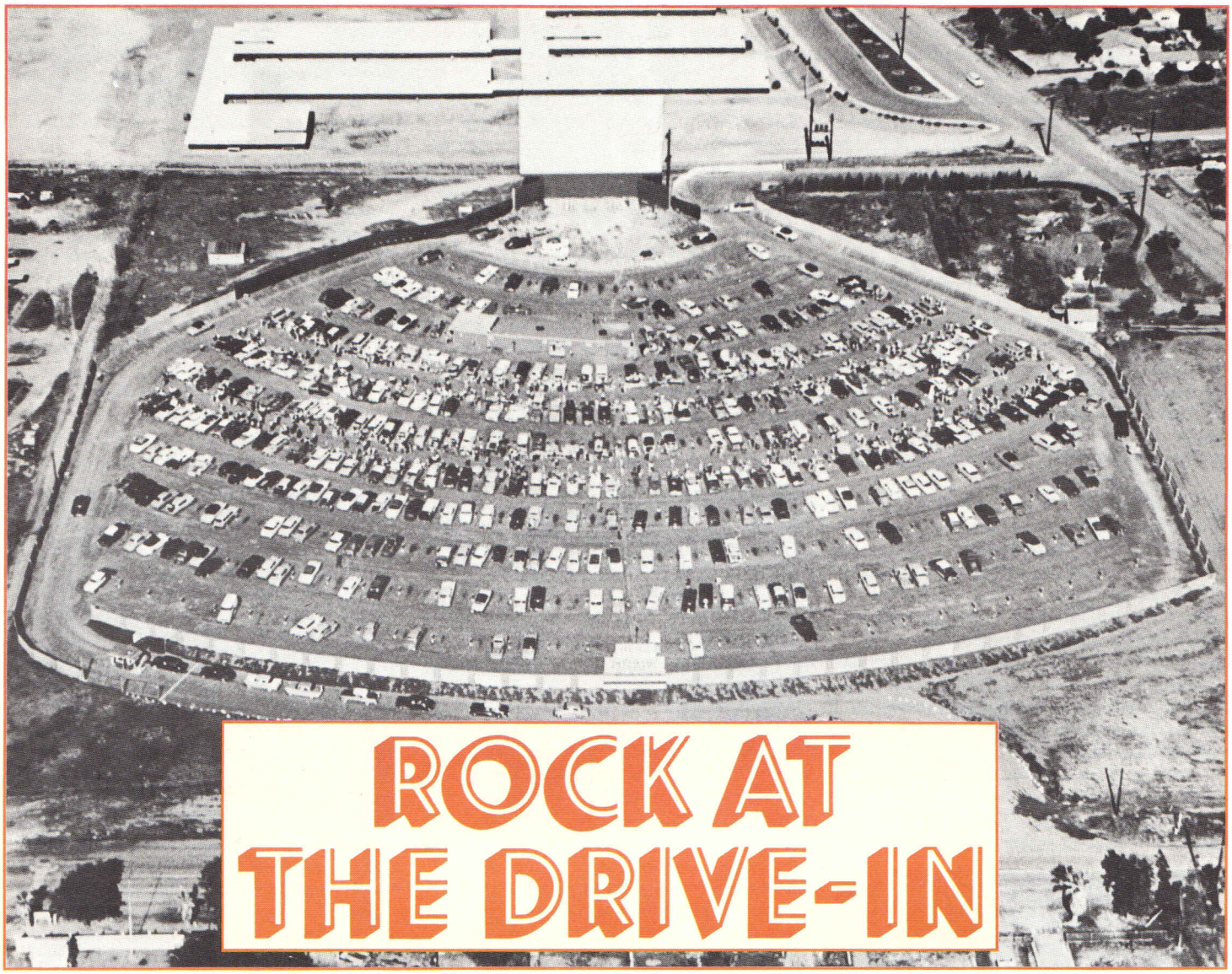
NOVEMBER
10 Elvis Presley's 'I Got Stung' enters US chart.
15 The Steelemen split from Tommy

Cliff Richard, heartthrob and hip-wiggler in action on 'Oh Boy!'.

Steele after two years as backing group.
Cliff Richard and the Drifters make their variety debut.
Bobby Day said to be leading a 'rock revival' with 'Rockin' Robin'.
28 Lord Rockingham's XI Number 1 in UK chart with 'Hoots Mon'.
Cha Cha is hailed as the latest craze.
Duane Eddy's 'Cannonball' at Number 15 in US chart.
Everly Brothers' 'Problems' at Number 2 in US chart.
Cliff Richard's 'High Class Baby' at Number 17 in UK chart.

DECEMBER
1 19-year-old Neil Sedaka, co-writer of 'Stupid Cupid', signed to a recording contract with RCA Records.
Elvis Presley expected to visit Britain during holiday period. He doesn't.
Cliff Richard attacked for 'obscenity' after wiggling hips on ITV's 'Oh Boy!' show. Says Cliff: 'I'm always sexy.'
Gene Vincent LP *A Gene Vincent Record Date* released in the UK.
8 Fats Domino's 'Whole Lotta Lovin' at Number 6 in US chart.
22 David Seville and the Chipmunks at Number 1 in US chart with 'The Chipmunk Song'.
26 Conway Twitty's 'It's Only Make Believe' tops UK chart.

CHRIS WELCH



ROCK AT THE DRIVE-IN

How rock was presented on the big screen

WHEN ROCK'N'ROLL first began to take hold of the imagination of the American teenage public in the winter of 1954-55, film producers did not consider it any of their business. The new music had very clear links with the radio stations, through which it had initially been popularised – it was a disc-jockey, Alan Freed, who has always been given credit for coining the term 'rock'n'roll' – but, as initially represented by Bill Haley, rock'n'roll had little inbuilt visual impact, no matter how stunning it sounded.

In any case, there was no way of gauging how long rock'n'roll would remain popular (many observers prophesied a life-span of no more than two or three months); the cinema wanted to deal with contemporary music of a more enduring kind. While Haley was making dance-halls vibrate and bodies gyrate, the moguls of the film industry were making *High Society*, starring Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong, a potent commercial combination from within the established popular music industry in comparison with which rock'n'roll seemed an unimportant minority interest.

Rock'n'roll was still in its infancy and the record industry – slow to respond to change – was unable to extract maximum commercial benefit from its artists. The well-oiled promotional and publicity machine so familiar today was unknown then. The notion that film work might stimulate an artist's recording career (and vice-versa) was unappreciated and, even if it had been, would have been difficult to put into practice because of the zealously protectionist policies of music copyright concerns. The complications in obtaining clearance from publishing companies and other interested bodies generally defied the best intentions of film producers, which is one of the reasons why they ordinarily preferred to commission original scores for films. This in itself tended to accentuate the difference between rock 'n'roll as a commodity for records on the one hand, and films on the other; for years, the majority of those rock'n'roll composers writing for films retained preconceived notions of the kind of material required for a film soundtrack, and this tended to cramp their natural style.

There was a final reason why rock and the cinema did not automatically seem to belong together. As a music that emerged from a number of regional centres spread out across America, rock'n'roll had little direct contact with a film industry based in Hollywood on the West Coast. Although there was a strong rhythm and blues tradition in California, it had little influence on the glamorous (and white) film business. And the two big rock'n'roll record labels that were based in Los Angeles (Imperial and Specialty) tended to look outside the state for new talent. Rock'n'roll and the cinema were therefore separated not only by a number of ingrained attitudes and established practices, but also by a sense of geographical distance.

Wild and rebellious

This is not to suggest that the cinema had been wholly oblivious to adolescent preoccupations, and two films in particular presaged the accommodation that would ultimately be reached with rock music. The first was Laslo Benedek's *The Wild One* (1953), starring Marlon Brando, a

melodramatic though hardly sensational story of a gang of hoodlum bikers at large. Today, it seems innocuous; at the time, it was considered inflammatory, and gained exceptional notoriety in the UK simply because it was banned there for 14 years.

The other film was Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955), which captured a growing mood amongst white teenage America (and in the process, strengthened that mood), namely the feeling of inexpressible frustration with the values of contemporary society as represented by parental authority. James Dean's ability to look morose and frustrated, expressing what was verbally inexpressible, meant he was perfectly cast as the rebel in question. Ray's film treated such emerging feelings of teenage rebellion with sympathy and perception, and spoke for a generation when it did so. Such adolescent alienation was a clear pre-condition for the emergence of rock'n'roll, and the death of Dean before the end of the year sealed the symbolic significance of the film. Teenagers now had an authentic hero who embodied a sense of group identification.

The link between truculent adolescence and rock'n'roll was properly forged later that year with Richard Brooks' *Blackboard Jungle*. The film itself belonged to a well-established Hollywood tradition in its portrayal of the generation gap as a conflict between recalcitrant youngsters and uncomprehending figures of authority, the gap being bridged by a solitary sympathetic adult.

Blackboard Jungle was, however, pioneering in two respects. First of all, it was set in one of the most deprived areas of New York, where social problems, and consequently teenage lawlessness, were

Left: An American drive-in of the Fifties. Above: Glen Ford gives Sidney Poitier some stern advice in Blackboard Jungle. *Below: Marlon Brando (left) and James Dean, the two film stars who most expressed the frustrations of American teenagers.*

endemic. It seems that the levels of hooliganism and violence among the schoolchildren in the film genuinely did shock the average American. What also separated it from moribund cinema traditions was the highly effective use of Bill Haley's 'Rock Around The Clock' over the opening credits.

In the context of *Blackboard Jungle*, the music and the general adolescent unruliness seemed logically to fit together. This had two inevitable consequences: the film enjoyed vast popularity with the young and, in the minds of many Americans, a direct link was established between rock 'n'roll and teenage violence (even though the film itself had refrained from implying that the former was in any way a cause of the latter).

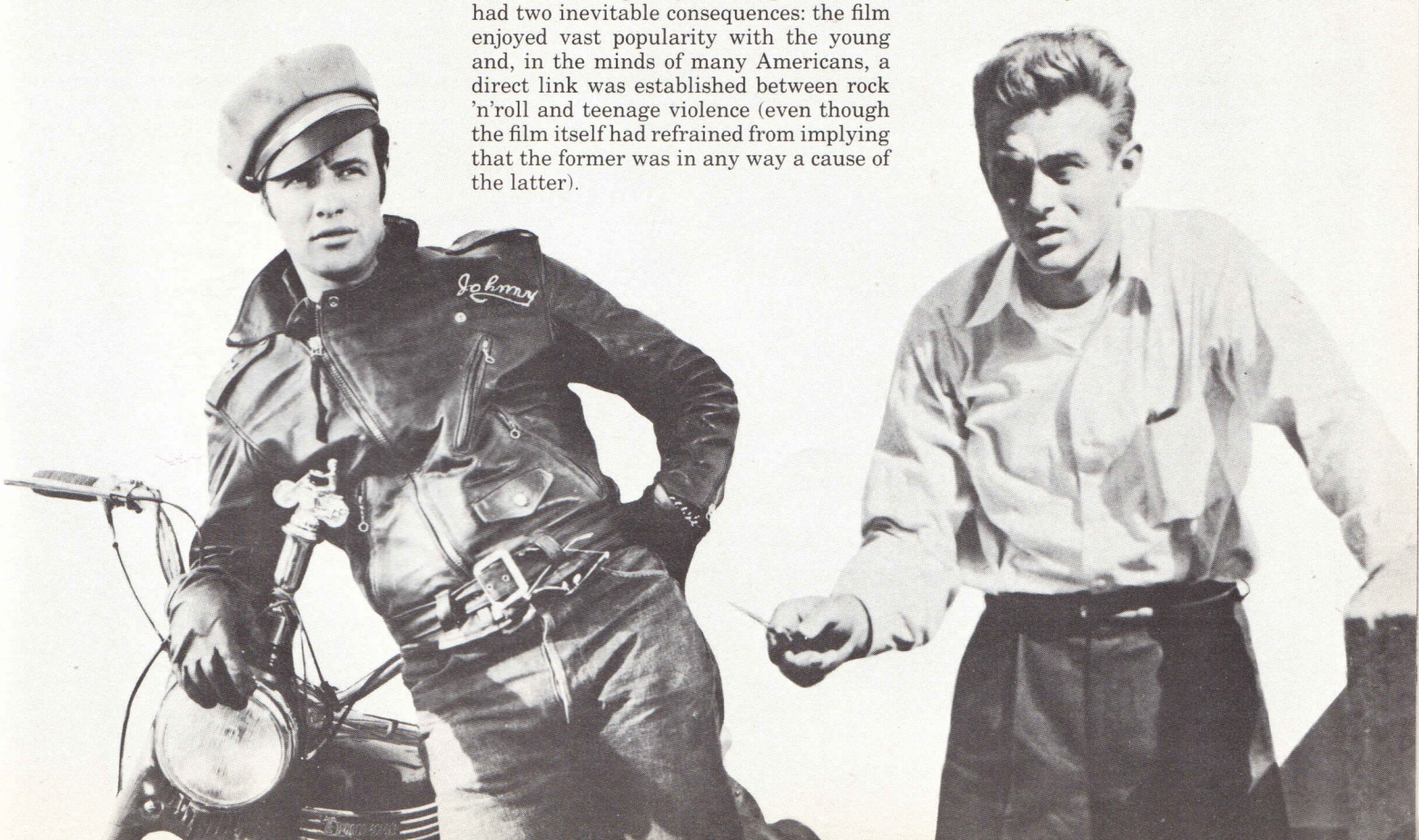
Thus, after *Blackboard Jungle*, filmmakers had one reason for incorporating rock music in their pictures – its commerciality – and one reason for ignoring it altogether – its supposedly pernicious influence. Religious and community leaders led the widespread condemnation of the new teenage music with its elemental, satanic 'beat' (a condemnation excellently and retrospectively documented by *Let The Good Times Roll* in 1973). In the volatile climate of the mid Fifties, it was perhaps not surprising that it was the less well-established film producers who were most prepared to gamble on the commercial potential of rock'n'roll on film.

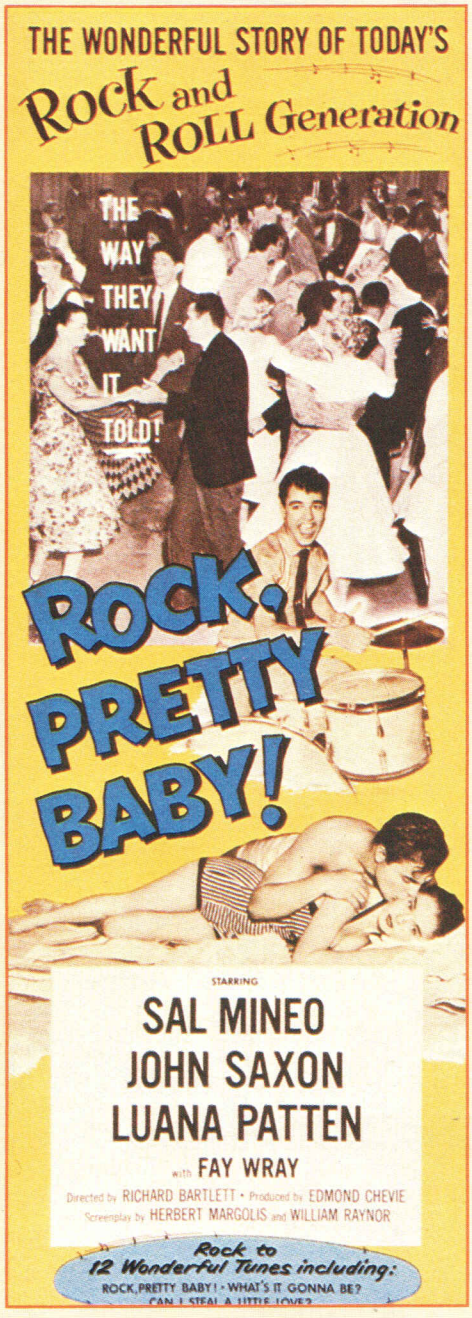
Katzman cashes in

The first such producer was Sam Katzman, who had spent many years making cheap second-features for Columbia. After the success of *Blackboard Jungle*, he signed Haley to make a film of his own, although neither Katzman nor anyone else was prepared to gamble a fortune on what was generally considered a risky business venture.

Haley's first film. inevitably entitled *Rock Around The Clock*, was a great success, however, proving that rock'n'roll could capture a cinema audience of its own. It had a plodding, conventional story-line, but that did not douse the excitement of the music.

After the resounding success of *Rock Around The Clock*, Columbia immediately commissioned a follow-up entitled *Don't Knock The Rock*. This was shot to the same hectic schedule and featured Little Richard in addition to Haley and the Comets. Rock'n'roll on film had proved its commercial viability in weeks rather than months – and productions from other stu-





dios now began to emerge. Neither of the first two rivals to the Columbia films, *Rock Pretty Baby*, and *Shake, Rattle And Roll* (the latter with Fats Domino) unduly taxed the imaginations of either their respective film makers or the general public, however; so far there was little flair in presenting the new music on the wide screen.

But late in 1956 a fine rock movie *did* appear. *The Girl Can't Help It* boasted the best array of rock acts so far: it had Little Richard, Fats Domino, Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran (the latter still only a minor figure so the casting was particularly inspired) and Julie London singing the classic version of 'Cry Me A River'. A coherent story-line was tackled by such established star names as Tom Ewell, Jayne Mansfield and Edmond O'Brien. The film was in colour, unusual for a rock film of that era as, with the exception of vehicles for the very biggest stars like Elvis Presley, rock cinema remained mainly in monochrome until well into the Sixties. Written, produced and directed by Frank Tashlin, *The Girl Can't Help It* was a happy experience for all concerned. It also made rock'n'roll, in cinematic terms, respectable subject-matter and showed that it had a place in major films, and not only exploitation 'quickies'.

King of the big screen

Even before the appearance of *The Girl Can't Help It*, a bridgehead had been established between the new music and film in the person of Elvis Presley. Elvis' commercial potential was quickly appreciated; all his films were produced by major companies and – unlike the films of most other rock stars – were frequently handled by well-established Hollywood directors. Michael Curtiz, whose *Casablanca* is one of the cinema's priceless jewels, directed *King Creole* at the age of 70; Norman Taurog, whose career, culminating in *Boy's Town*, had blossomed in the Thirties, directed nine of Presley's films.

Presley's acting reputedly impressed Hollywood veterans (if not the waspish film critics) and from the moment when his first feature, *The Reno Brothers*, was re-titled *Love Me Tender*, he seemed to have a fruitful career ahead of him. His other pre-army pictures (*Loving You*, *Jailhouse Rock* and *King Creole*) kept alive the promise without quite fulfilling it. Presley's subsequent Sixties films did nothing for his reputation, however; all

A poster of Rock Pretty Baby *(left) and a girl who couldn't help it: Jayne Mansfield (above). Below: Rebellious teenagers as seen in* High School Confidential *(left) and* Untamed Youth.

Rock'n'roll musicians in rock'n'roll films: Bill Haley looks heavenward (above left), while the piano-thumping Little Richard plays on (above right) – both starred in Don't Knock The Rock. *The Moonglows (below) appeared in* Rock Rock Rock.

fell into the trap of assuming that it was possible to build a successful picture around one star name without consideration of any other factors. This was one of Hollywood's most dangerous misconceptions, and the reason that Presley suffered most from it is simply that he was the biggest name of all.

Prosperity and decline

Rock'n'roll prospered during 1956 and 1957, and the film industry geared itself to turning out a flood of cheap movies that focused either on teenage malcontents, rock'n'roll, or both. Rock'n'roll was a phrase on which producers placed a rather liberal interpretation, resulting in the presence of popsters Tommy Sands, the Four Preps and the like in films that ostensibly concerned themselves with rock. But in 1958 the flood of cheap films turned into a trickle, not only because there was a temporary recession in the motion-picture industry, but also because there was a feeling that rock'n'roll had burnt itself out.

Those few films that were made fell into two categories. Some continued to use the dramatic context of adolescent unrest and, ignoring the lead of *The Girl Can't Help It*, also continued to be low-budget. One that arrived at the tail-end of the flood, *Untamed Youth* (1957), was concerned with teenage rebellion and featured Eddie Cochran again; *High School Confidential* (1958) boasted a memorable performance from Jerry Lee Lewis and was one of the first of its kind to explore drug themes; and *Because They're Young* (1960) was yet another film about untamed youth – staged, this time, in the classroom with Dick Clark (the host of the country's top television pop programme) as a young teacher. The cast included Tuesday Weld, who was given mediocre roles in several of these early rock films but later developed into a talented actress.

Other films eschewed the 'hard' themes of alienated youth for 'soft' themes that focused more directly on the pop process itself. *Go Johnny Go!* was a film presented by Alan Freed which offered a narrative, loosely based on his own experiences, of a disc jockey who discovers a talented singer and sets him on the road to fame. This was Cochran's third (and, sadly, last) film; Jackie Wilson and Chuck Berry, whose lyrics provided the film's title, were also involved. Earlier, *Disc Jockey Jamboree* (1957) was a transitional movie, since it featured established jazz stars – Count Basie and Joe Williams – alongside the new rock pretenders as exemplified by Frankie Avalon, with Fats Domino stuck somewhere in the middle. This same blend was used in *Jazz On A Summer's Day* (1960), a film that was simply a cinematic record of a particular concert, the Newport Jazz Festival of 1959. Filmed

Rock exploitation movies of the early Sixties: the girls from Where The Boys Are *(above and left) and a poster for* Twist Around The Clock *(below), with the twisting Chubby Checker heading the cast.*

in colour, it was immensely enjoyable, with contributions from Sonny Stitt, Anita O'Day, Chico Hamilton, Louis Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson and veteran rock'n'roller Chuck Berry.

Last of the line

Inspiration was already flagging by the beginning of the Sixties, and rock films seemed to become cheaper and more derivative all the time. They were further handicapped by the fact that the majority of the original stars of the music had either hung up their rock'n'roll shoes or were otherwise unavailable; Chuck Berry, for example, was in prison for offences under the Mann Act.

One exception that should be mentioned is *Where The Boys Are* (1961), in which Connie Francis was given a starring role. It was a deserved break for her, since she had been one of the world's leading female singers during the previous three years and had also, frustratingly, dubbed the singing voices for actresses several times. Francis had provided Tuesday Weld's vocals in *Rock Rock Rock* and had also been heard in the film *Disc Jockey Jamboree.*

With a commendable lack of egotism, Francis took an ugly duckling part in *Where The Boys Are.* Apart from isolated vocals from Francis (the title-song was written for her by Neil Sedaka), the film could lay claim to an intermittently witty script and was considered risqué for its time, since it suggested that the routine preoccupations of respectable college girls began and ended with sex.

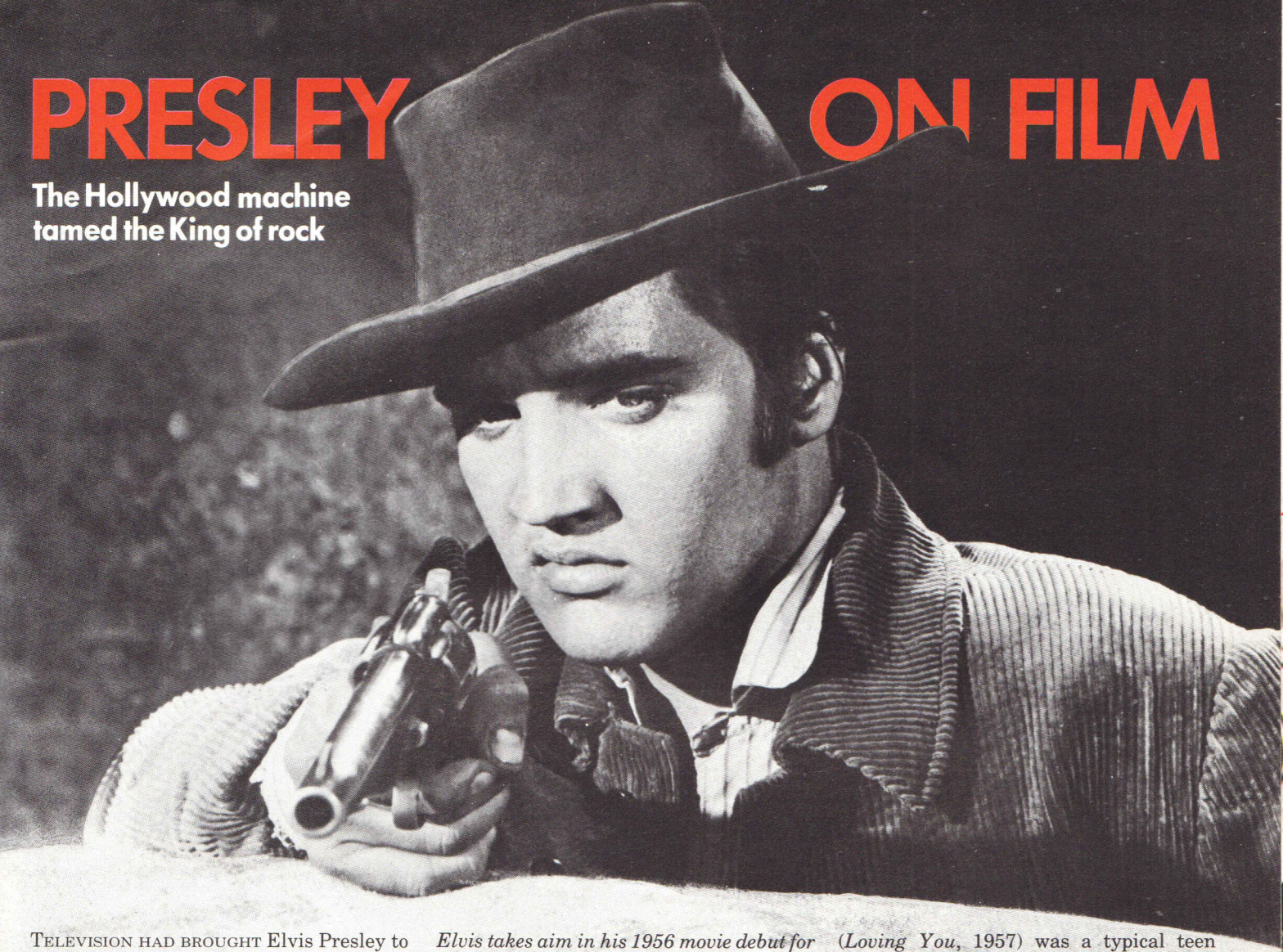
That same year (1961), Sam Katzman re-emerged with another of his production-line exploitation movies, *Twist Around The Clock*, which starred Chubby Checker, the leading star of the Twist craze. The film itself probably gave many people the impression that they had been here before. They were right – they had. It was one of the last in a line which had begun with *Rock Around The Clock.*

Today, most of these early rock films are interesting either as pure nostalgia, or as historical-sociological artefacts. The need for immediate commercial product was too great to allow anything of artistic merit to emerge. Even though the US film industry adapted itself to rock'n'roll, it never really saw it as anything other than an opportunity to make fast money. Rock 'n'roll was disposable junk, but if the kids liked it then there was money in it for the industry. The notion that talented and original film-makers might want to involve themselves in this area remained, for the moment, unthinkable.

BOB WOFFINDEN

PRESLEY ON FILM

The Hollywood machine tamed the King of rock

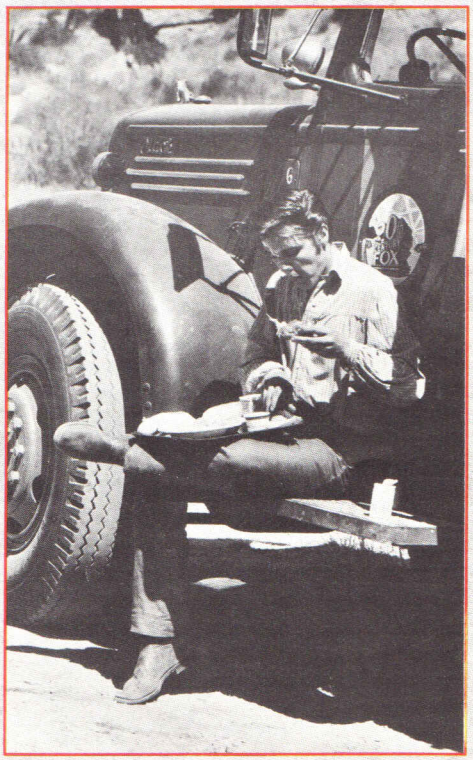


TELEVISION HAD BROUGHT Elvis Presley to the American nation; but films were to spread his name, music and image even further afield. The cinema could reach a worldwide audience without his management needing to invest in the costly overheads of transportation, backing bands, roadcrew, Holiday Inns and sound systems. Colonel Parker's boy was good-looking and had an enormous following: both prime requirements for film stardom. It was just a matter of finding the right formula.

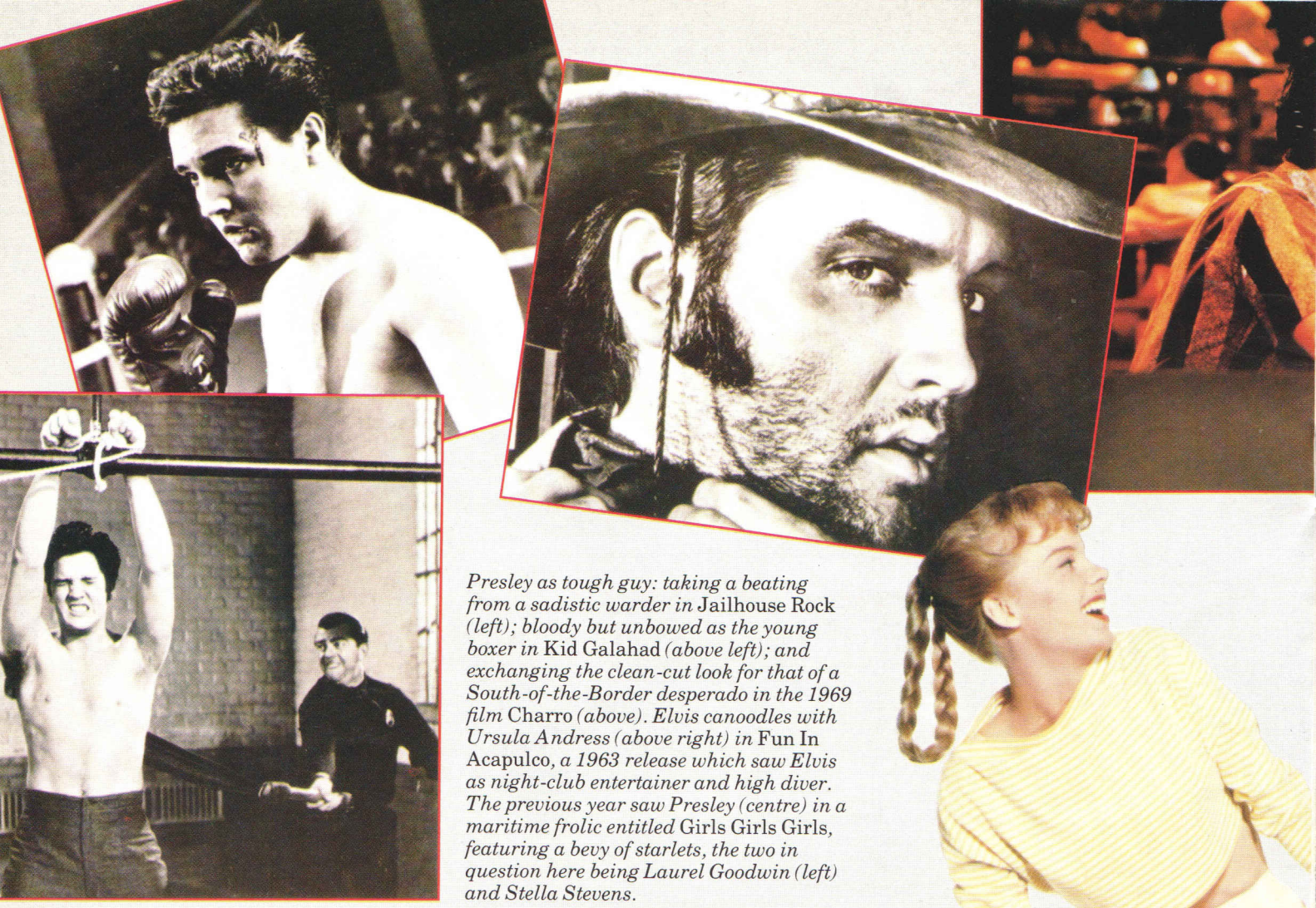
Presley's film debut was *Love Me Tender* in 1957. The film was produced by David Weisbart, whose track record included the late James Dean's *Rebel Without A Cause*. Sadly, this first film was less than convincing. Four country-flavoured songs were slipped into a tale of the US Civil War, with Presley caught up in a conflict between his brother and the girl they both wooed. The film's original title *The Reno Brothers* had been dropped in favour of Presley's title song which provided a plug for the movie (as did the movie for the record). The melodramatic death scene, in which Presley lingered long enough to give his blessing to his brother and the girl, was an embarrassing cliché; but *Love Me Tender's* million-dollar outlay was recouped in a mere three weeks.

Produced by Hal Wallis, the second film (*Loving You*, 1957) was a typical teen movie – and in Technicolor too. It had the star almost 'playing himself' in the guise of Deke Rivers, truck-driver turned rock 'n'roll star. Scotty Moore and Bill Black were among the musicians who backed Presley on seven songs which formed the basis of the *Loving You* soundtrack album, released in July 1957; the film also spawned a number of singles. Records of this nature were a valuable adjunct to the films themselves: they required little additional advertising revenue and could hardly fail to register in the charts. Sadly, however, these compilations were to become the bulk of Presley's recording output and many of the songs were slight products of hack writers, struggling to keep up with Presley's release rate.

Elvis takes aim in his 1956 movie debut for Twentieth Century Fox, Love Me Tender, *(above) while (below) he snatches a meal during one of the breaks in the filming of the movie.*



Although *Loving You* received scarcely more critical plaudits than its predecessor, at least it focused on Presley doing what he did well – and was all the better for that. *Jailhouse Rock* marked the first conscious broadening of the Presley appeal, and in many ways combined the serious and musical aspects of his first two films. Released in late 1957, it was another rags-to-riches story but had Presley imprisoned after accidentally killing a man in a bar-room brawl. Now remembered for the memorable production number showcasing the title song, it also contained two further *bona fide* rock songs



Presley as tough guy: taking a beating from a sadistic warder in Jailhouse Rock *(left); bloody but unbowed as the young boxer in* Kid Galahad *(above left); and exchanging the clean-cut look for that of a South-of-the-Border desperado in the 1969 film* Charro *(above). Elvis canoodles with Ursula Andress (above right) in* Fun In Acapulco, *a 1963 release which saw Elvis as night-club entertainer and high diver. The previous year saw Presley (centre) in a maritime frolic entitled* Girls Girls Girls, *featuring a bevy of starlets, the two in question here being Laurel Goodwin (left) and Stella Stevens.*

in 'Baby I Don't Care' and 'Treat Me Nice'. The rockers tapered off, however, to feature a ballad over the closing credits.

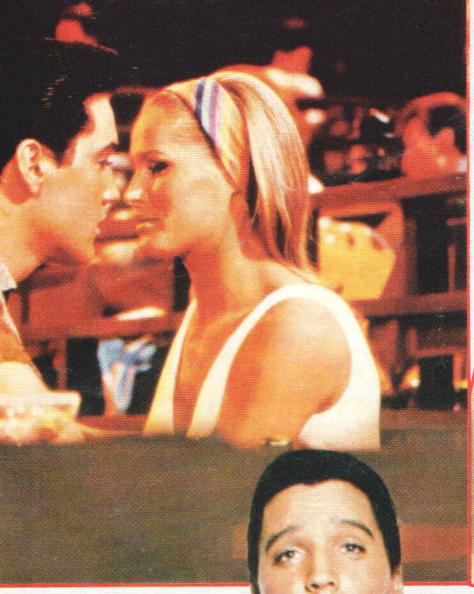
The big league

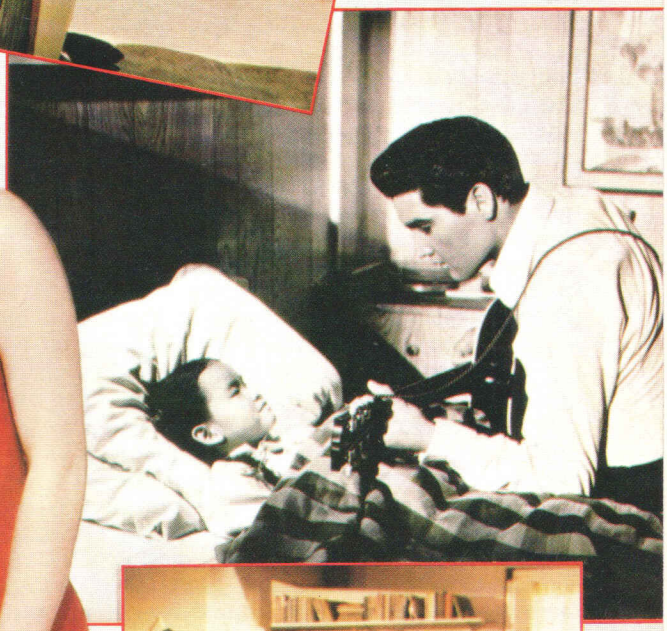
By the time *Jailhouse Rock* had been completed, Elvis Presley was in the big league. The pre-production budget for *King Creole* had already exceeded 300,000 dollars when completion was jeopardised by a letter to the star from the Memphis draft board. Deferment of Presley's induction into the US Army enabled him to complete a film critically acknowledged as his best to date. The story line was adapted from Harold Robbins' novel *A Stone For Danny Fisher*; Elvis played Fisher and was furnished with a good supporting cast, including Walter Matthau and Carolyn Jones. With Presley cast as an employee in a New Orleans night-club, there were obvious possibilities for songs, and the film can be considered a traditional musical, with 11 songs crammed into the 115-minute running time. The *New York Times* reviewed the film as 'generally a pleasure' – quite a contrast to previous critical maulings from the press.

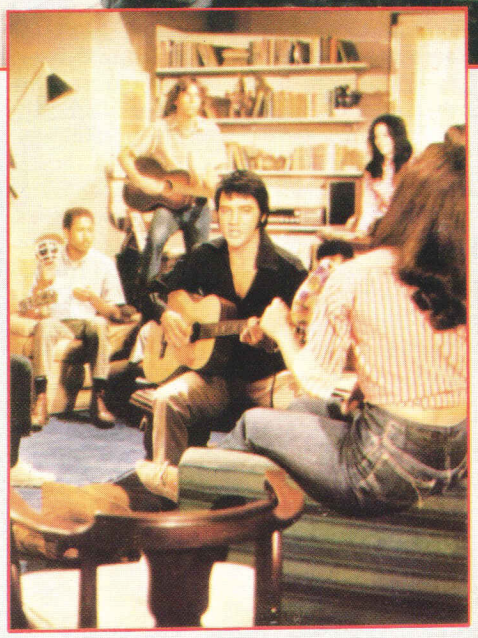
Elvis' return from two years in the Army signalled the end of the first phase of his work in films as a rock singer who acted 'on the side'. The Elvis Presley who faced the cameras for his next film, *GI Blues*, was Elvis the all-round entertainer. To some, this was a tragedy, a desertion of all he had stood for, but to others it seemed a natural progression.

GI Blues was released in 1960 and shamelessly cashed in on Presley's involuntary period of patriotic duty. It was inoffensive and bland in the extreme and, despite the ample charms of co-star Juliet Prowse, had him singing the most successful song, 'Wooden Heart' to a puppet! However wooden his performance in this forgettable film, the success of *GI Blues* confirmed his importance at the box office and gave him more leverage in dictating the kind of film roles he could attempt. An initial result of this may well have been his appearances in *Flaming Star* in 1960 and *Wild In The Country* the following year. Cast in the former as the perennial outsider – a half-breed Red Indian – Elvis acquitted himself reasonably, while in the latter, a slow-burning soap-opera, he was supported by such names as Tuesday Weld, Hope Lange and John Ireland. With only four songs in *Star* and five in *Country*, the word got round that Elvis' concentration on acting had been at the expense of his music. The expected packed houses failed to materialise, and the promising new chapter opened in 1960 was abruptly ended.

Presley's appearance on stage in a charity show in Hawaii in 1961 was his last live show until 1969 – eight years and 21 films later. And apart from film soundtrack albums, only three original LPs were







Elvis chases Ann-Margret in one of his better cinematic efforts, Viva Las Vegas *(top); demonstrating his bedside manner in* It Happened At The World's Fair *(middle), and leading the singing in* Change Of Habit. *Shot in 1970 and co-starring Mary Tyler Moore, the latter was Presley's last feature film.*

ELVIS PRESLEY
Filmography

1956 *Love Me Tender*; 1957 *Loving You, Jailhouse Rock*; 1958 *King Creole*; 1960 *GI Blues, Flaming Star*; 1961 *Wild In The Country, Blue Hawaii*; 1962 *Follow That Dream, Kid Galahad, Girls! Girls! Girls!*; 1963 *It Happened At The World's Fair, Fun In Acapulco*; 1964 *Kissin' Cousins, Viva Las Vegas* (GB: *Love In Las Vegas*), *Roustabout*; 1965 *Girl Happy, Tickle Me, Harum Scarum* (GB: *Harem Holiday*); 1966 *Frankie And Johnnie, Paradise — Hawaiian Style, Spinout* (GB: *California Holiday*); 1967 *Easy Come Easy Go, Double Trouble, Clambake*; 1968 *Stay Away Joe, Speedway, Live A Little Love A Little*; 1969 *Charro!, The Trouble With Girls, Change Of Habit*; 1970 *Elvis, That's The Way It Is* (doc); 1973 *Elvis On Tour* (doc); 1981 *This Is Elvis* (doc).

Above: Elvis returned to live performance on the NBC-TV show of 1968. Below: The King pictured in rehearsal for a Las Vegas show, from the 1970 documentary entitled Elvis, That's The Way It Is.

issued in this period – and one of these was a gospel album, *How Great Thou Art*. And as the films and their accompanying music became more important, so they become more formularised. *Blue Hawaii*, released in 1961, started the rot and from then onwards it was downhill (almost) all the way. Grossing 4.7 million dollars on its first run in the States, *Blue Hawaii* was slight but successful, the combination of surf, swimtrunks and sportscars equalling pure escapism. The soundtrack became the year's fastest-selling album, as well as Presley's biggest hit to date. An excursion into comedy with *Follow That Dream* in 1962 was followed by a remake of the 1933 film, *Kid Galahad*, in which Presley played a boxer. Despite the obvious attraction of Elvis stripped to the waist (for his third consecutive film), the combination of a heavier plot and fewer songs failed to bring in the required receipts. So it was back to Hawaii for the self-explanatory *Girls! Girls! Girls!* (also in 1962).

What Elvis thought of this is difficult to tell. Throughout the Sixties films he was portrayed as a clean-living, straightahead and often misunderstood character. He retreated from any semblance of reality – a strange mannequin, a puppet dancing to the tune of cash registers and an expensive lifestyle. Elvis as boxer, Indian, musician, frogman . . . the list was not so much endless as repetitive. It would take a miracle, it seemed, to remove Presley from the lucrative treadmill on which he found himself.

Presley's rejuvenation came in a 1968 NBC-TV special. Whether his return to performing was motivated by his recent wedding and subsequent fatherhood or whether, as is equally likely, the rapid decline of box office receipts had persuaded the Colonel to sanction this television production is open to debate. Certainly, the stringent terms laid down to the movie moguls by Parker – including a one million dollar fee, 50 per cent of the profits, 25 per cent of the TV sale and the two million dollar/ten-week restriction on shooting costs and duration – were looking ever more excessive with each succeeding film. Whatever the reason, Elvis now began playing in front of 'real' people (as opposed to paid film extras) for the first time since 1961. The success of the 1968 TV show foreshadowed his live comeback in Las Vegas in the summer of 1969, and the headlines which that month-long residency provided effectively obscured the release of *Change Of Habit*, his last formula film, a few months later.

Presley's return to the stage inevitably meant the end of his film career, even if he hadn't consciously decided to retire from the screen. His new-found passion for roadwork was so all-consuming that it undoubtedly contributed to his divorce in 1973. The final films, *Elvis, That's The Way It Is* (1970) and *Elvis On Tour* (1973) showed the man in his element, playing to his own script on the concert stage.

Apart from Elvis Presley's own name, the closing credits to each film contained the legend 'Technical Advisor: Colonel Tom Parker'. An ever-present reminder to the audience of the power behind the King, this 'rubber-stamp' was to make a final appearance on 1981's posthumous release, *This Is Elvis*. Written, produced and directed by Malcolm Leo and Andrew Solt, it cleverly merged newsreel, television and onstage footage with simulations staged with four 'pseudo-Presleys' to provide another look at the legend. While it broke no new ground, *This Is Elvis* is noteworthy for its closing sequence, which commences with Presley in concert singing 'My Way'. As the song progresses, images of the past flash up as before a dying man, mirroring perhaps the twilight world in which Elvis existed in the years prior to his death. Sadly, the majority of the films to which Presley lent his name are scant epitaph to a man who was the first superstar of rock, but who eventually lost his grip on his career.

MICHAEL HEATLEY

Mr Rock'n'Roll

Alan Freed, the white DJ who championed black music

Always a snappy dresser, Alan Freed (above) set the style for the first crop of Fifties' rock'n'roll movies (below).

ALAN FREED, THE MAN responsible for giving rock'n'roll its name, was many things to many people. To some, he was the original Mr Clean, an innocent 'good guy' who opened up hitherto-segregated airwaves and made an unparalleled contribution to the advancement of black popular music. This was the sympathetic impression conveyed by the Floyd Mutrux 1978 bio-pic, *American Hot Wax*. 'He brought us rock'n'roll,' said Mutrux, 'I didn't want to say bad things about a guy who started all that.' To others like Alexander Walker, the London *Evening Standard* film critic who met the volatile disc jockey during his heyday, Freed was a pathetic figure, an ignorant crook who accepted kickbacks from any promoter willing to pay his price.

Of Welsh-Lithuanian descent, Freed was born on 15 December 1921 in Johnstown, Pennsylvania; his family moved to Salem, Ohio, when he was four. Freed described his childhood as 'normal', although his surroundings were far from affluent. He showed some musical talent, wanted to become a concert trombonist and, at high school, organised a dance-band which he called the Sultans of Swing after the famous Harlem jazz orchestra. At Ohio State University, he enrolled for a course in journalism but switched to mechanical engineering to please his father. 'One day,' he told Vic Fredericks in 1957, 'I peered through the window at the campus radio station and that was it – I was gone.'

Divorce and the draft

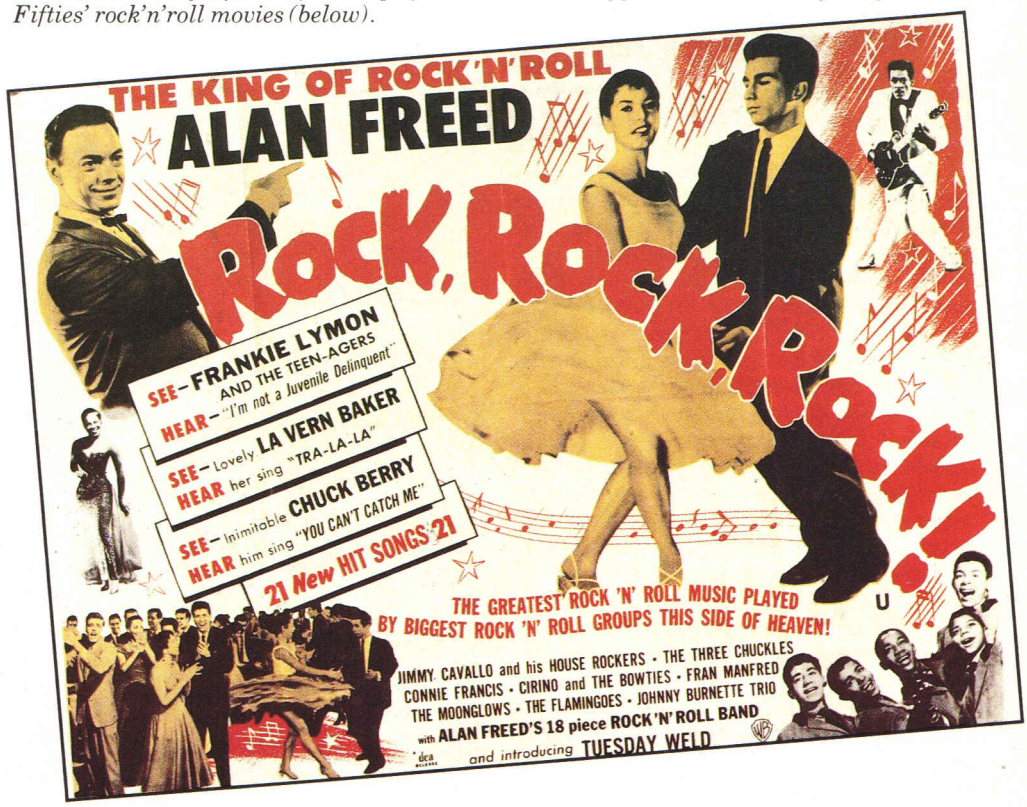
On leaving college, Freed was drafted into the US Army Signal Corps, but was discharged when he contracted double mastoiditis. The infection left him with damaged hearing: 'Please don't say that's why I like rock'n'roll,' was his stock comment on his condition. After many auditions for work as a radio announcer (CBS told him to forget it because of his grating Midwest accent), Freed took a 17-dollars-a-week job with radio WKST in New Castle, Pennsylvania; from 1943 to 1950 he drifted from one station to another, usually as a sportscaster or disc jockey playing classical records.

Freed married in 1944 and soon had two children. The 13-hour day he was working on Akron's WAKR radio in the late forties was not conducive to family life, however, and the couple agreed on a divorce in 1949. The following year, while working on Cleveland's WXEL-TV, Freed married 39-year-old Jacqueline Hess.

It was in Cleveland that Freed met Leo Mintz, proprietor of the city's Record Rendezvous shop. Mintz had observed that white teenagers were buying unusually large numbers of rhythm and blues records and encouraged Freed to give black music airplay on the radio programme the disc jockey had on Cleveland's powerful 50-kilowatt WJW station. Freed introduced 'Moondog's Rock'n'Roll Party' in June 1951. He had re-christened rhythm and blues to avoid the racial stigma he thought inherent in the classification, and the new phrase 'rock'n'roll', long-used as a sexual metaphor, now described the music he played. 'It was more Leo's idea than mine,' Freed later admitted.

Broadcast from 5 pm to 6 pm and 11.15 pm to 2 am from Monday to Friday and from 11.15 pm to 3 am on Saturdays, the programme was an instant success. Freed howled his way through the theme tune (Todd Rhodes' 'Blues For Moon Dog'), introduced each disc in a hoarse jive patter and accompanied the beat by slapping his palm on a telephone directory. Soupy Sales, the station's morning host, later remarked: 'In fact, Freed was always drunk but it was alright . . . he could handle it.'

Prompted by his abnormally high ratings, Freed staged his Moondog Coronation Ball with black stars the Moonglows and the Dominoes at the 10,000-capacity Cleveland Arena. On 21 March 1952, a racially mixed crowd of 25,000 showed up and broke down the doors – the first rock'n'roll riot. Freed had sold 18,000 tickets in advance, but charges of overselling were dropped, and the disc jockey was to



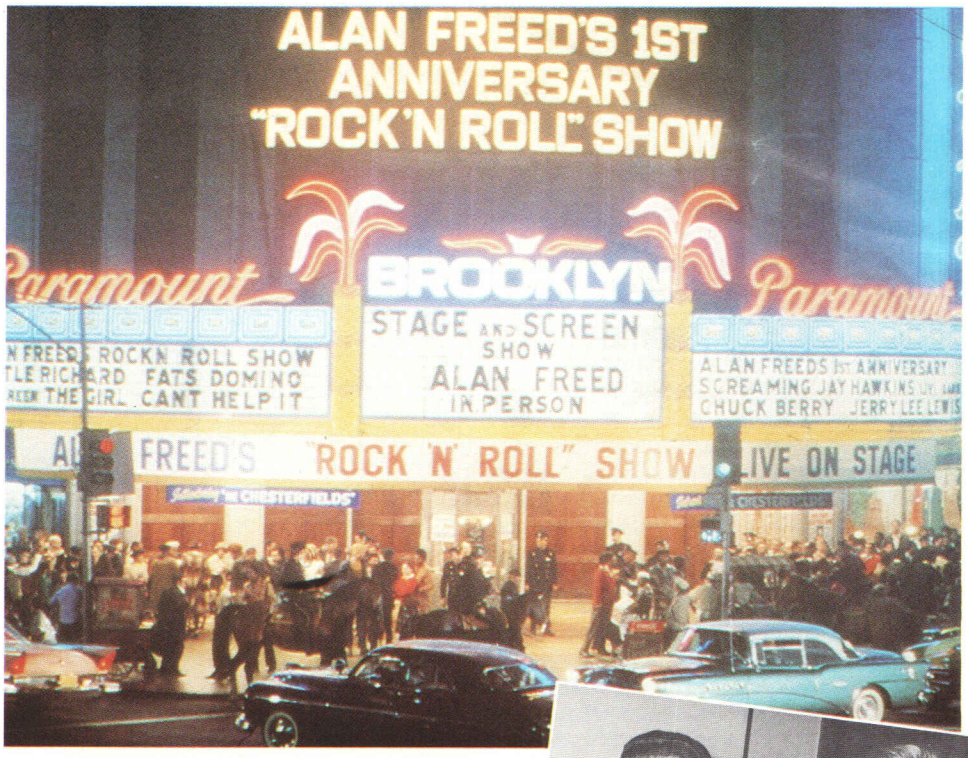
continue to double as concert promoter throughout the Fifties.

In April 1953, at the height of his Cleveland popularity, Freed drove his car into a tree after a late broadcast. His face required 260 stitches and 12,000 dollars' worth of plastic surgery, but five weeks later he resumed his broadcasts from a hospital bed. That same year, he plugged the Orioles' record, 'Crying In The Chapel', the first R&B record to make the pop Top Twenty. The day after Freed's repeated spins, the disc sold 30,000 copies in Cleveland; that so many copies were readily available appears evidence of some prior agreement. Dubious financial arrangements seemed confirmed when, years later, it was revealed that Jerry Blaine, owner of the Orioles' Jubilee label, held the mortgage on Freed's house.

Rockin' the East Coast

In 1954, Freed's WJW show was taped for WNJR in Newark, the city in which he staged his first East Coast live concert on 1 May; it was a sell-out. News of Freed's popularity spread to New York where he joined radio WINS for a salary of 25,000 dollars a year. Programme director Bob Smith hired Freed without knowing whether he was black or white. 'Moondog's Rock'n'Roll Party', which ran from 7 to 11 pm, six nights a week, was first aired on WINS on 8 September 1954, but another Moondog – a blind Manhattan street percussionist – sued Freed over the use of the name and the show became simply 'Rock'n'Roll Party'. In January 1955 Freed staged his first New York concert at the St Nicholas Arena; the audience was 70 per cent white and 30 per cent black. The following Easter he brought a show to the Brooklyn Paramount; this one, featuring the Moonglows and the Penguins, became the prototype for the many Easter, Labor Day and Christmas shows which followed.

During the late Fifties Freed's Paramount concerts broke box office records on several occasions, grossing as much as 300,000 dollars over the 12 days between Christmas and the New Year. There were usually six or seven shows a day with 15 acts on the bill. Police patrolled the aisles and *Billboard* reported an Alcatraz-like atmosphere, while *Variety* magazine thought it akin to having an aisle seat for the San Francisco earthquake. On top of his take (involving sums previously unheard-of for a promoter), Freed formed and directed his own band, which recorded for Coral; the label paid Freed 25,000 dollars a year. He also taped weekly shows for stations in Baltimore, St Louis and, in Europe, Radio Luxembourg. At his peak, he attracted no fewer than 4000 fan clubs – mostly on the US East Coast – and presided over legions of New York label owners, promotion men and publishers' representatives, most of whom helped swell the Freed coffers with 'gifts' of jewellery, booze and – what was later held to be most damning of all – cash payments.



Freed on film

In 1956, Freed starred in the films *Rock Around The Clock* and *Don't Knock The Rock*. Portraying himself as a paternal friend to the nation's youth – helping them and rock'n'roll to conquer all adversity – Freed seemed wooden and not in the least charismatic. But in making these two films, and also *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1957), *Mister Rock'n'Roll* (1957) and *Go Johnny Go!* (1959), Freed enjoyed the genuine friendship of his co-stars. When

Freed at the top – a still from the film American Hot Wax *(above); Freed in trouble – leaving a Boston court with his wife (right), and Freed the musical patron – presenting a disc to the Mellows, one of the many black harmony groups he helped to stardom (below).*

Earl Carroll of the Cadillacs (who appeared in *Go Johnny Go!*) was asked whether Freed was really Mr Sincerity, he replied, 'The man is beautiful, just beautiful . . . he was a fair man and he kept me with food on the table quite a few times. He was for real.'

Another artist who held Freed in high regard was Chuck Berry, who stated: 'He was a brother, you know. The record company gave it to him, but he never demanded anything.' Freed's name appeared among the composing credits to 'Maybellene' and the Moonglows' 'Sincerely' although he did not write either; but, on the other hand, Chuck Berry and the Moonglows appeared in his films and monopolised his turntable. The Moonglows, whose name tied in with the Moondog show, made their first record for Freed's Champagne label and he introduced them to their subsequent labels, Chance and Chess. Freed was in many ways an ambivalent figure, for as well as promoting rock'n'roll he made a small fortune out of it; many artists received a considerable reduction of their due royalties because Freed's name appeared on songwriting credits, but on the other hand, his sponsorship helped the records succeed.

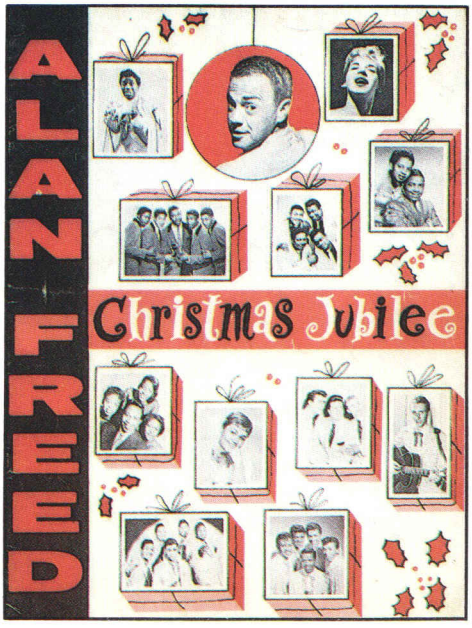
It's important to note that Freed never pushed a record he didn't like. Not only did he give exposure to Fats Domino, Little Richard and other stars, he also played obscure R&B and rockabilly songs, making short-lived stars out of Billy Brooks, Mac Curtis, Barbie Gaye (who sang the original 'My Boy Lollipop') and dozens of black vocal groups. He refused to play Pat Boone or the Crewcuts and attacked disc jockeys who preferred their pale imitation cover records. 'They're anti-Negro,' he told Vic Fredericks. 'If it isn't that, what is it? Oh, they can always excuse it on the grounds that the covers are better quality, but I defy anyone to show me that the quality of the original 'Tweedlee Dee' [LaVern Baker] or 'Seven Days' [Clyde McPhatter] is poor.'

King in his castle

Beyond the artists he sponsored so assiduously, Freed did not make friends very easily. 'His ego was huge' said radio programme director Bob Smith. 'He was an impossible individual on a personal basis.' Freed's style offended many. He lived in a 16-room stucco mansion overlooking Long Island Sound in an exclusive district of Stamford. By 1957 his fear of automobiles made him something of a recluse and the station equipped his home with remote broadcasting facilities. Some of the more sophisticated record men disliked Freed's vulgarity and took umbrage at having to visit 'His Majesty, the King in his Connecticut Castle', as Atlantic's Jerry Wexler once put it. If there was one luxury Freed lacked it was a press agent to tell him how to present the correct image.

On 3 May 1958, Freed compered the 'Big Beat Show' at the Boston Arena, with Jerry Lee Lewis topping the bill. To prevent dancing in the aisles, police turned up the lights. Apologising to the audience, Freed was alleged to have said 'Hey kids, the Boston police don't want you to have a good time.' In the city-wide orgy of violence which followed, a score of Bostonians were beaten, stabbed and robbed.

A programme for a typical Freed extravaganza of stars, Christmas Jubilee.



'Alan was one of my best friends in the business. He wouldn't take a dime from me because he used to be a trombone player and used to play my arrangements. One time I had five acts on his hit parade and everybody swore I was paying him off but I wasn't. I had no way of showing my appreciation and then one day he says "I gotta title for a song – Sweet Sixteen". I went back, wrote the song (for the Colts) and put his name on it. I definitely owed Alan a lot of favours. He lived three blocks away from me in the early Sixties and he was completely ignored. Now Freed was responsible for the success of 15 top acts including the Platters. He made millions for big record companies who paid him to play the records and they had a fine slice of his rock'n'roll revues. When he was dying his wife rang and asked for money. I said, "Do you mean to say out of all the people he helped you can't get any money?" She said "No". Outside of one other fellow who helped, she had to bury him with the 500 dollars I sent her. That's it – the man who was instrumental for rock'n'roll.'

Buck Ram
(Manager of the Platters)

Rock'n'roll was banned, not just in Boston but in Maine, Connecticut and New Jersey. Indicted under anti-anarchy laws, Freed was charged with wickedly and maliciously inciting both a riot and the unlawful destruction of property. The charges were dropped after 17 months of judicial argument, leaving Freed with legal fees which ensured his bankruptcy. WINS had not supported him during the crisis and he left the station in disgust. In addition, the Brooklyn Paramount refused to play host to further Freed concerts. Popularity among teenagers could not save the DJ from establishment wrath.

Freed moved to WABC where he began presenting the 'Big Beat Show'. Within weeks, a probe into rigged television quiz shows had widened into a public examination of payola. In November 1959, Freed was dismissed from WABC after refusing to sign an affidavit denying that he had ever received bribes in return for playing records. The defiant disc jockey informed the press that what broadcasting called payola, Washington called 'lobbying' – a comment that did little to endear him to the establishment. After testifying before the Harris Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight ('the payola hearings'), Freed was arrested in New York State on 26 charges of commercial bribery totalling over 30,000 dollars. In December 1962, having pleaded guilty to some of the charges, he received a six-month suspended sentence and a 300-dollar fine.

In 1959 Freed had begun working for KDAY radio in Los Angeles in an attempt to revive his career, but in 1964 he was charged with income tax evasion on 47,920 dollars received between 1957 and 1959. Ten months later, on 20 January 1965, he died of uremia in a Palm Springs hospital at the age of 43. He left a third wife, Inga, and his four children by earlier marriages.

Freed deserves to be remembered for his adventurous – even imprudent – efforts on behalf of the music he loved. His early non-segregated dances often defied local custom and his partiality to black artists was not universally popular. His short-lived 'Rock'n'Roll Dance Party' show on CBS-TV, cancelled when the cameras caught Frankie Lymon jiving with a white girl, also enraged the segregationists. Later, Freed went on the same television channel to defend Jerry Lee Lewis' controversial nuptials ('these Southern boys marry young') and he often appeared to condone delinquency ('They're not bad kids, if the theater gets a few broken seats, that's their problem'). Whatever Freed's personal frailties, he did far more than most whites to popularise black music. 'He died,' said the *New York Post*, 'depending on whether you get an uptempo version or a slow blues, of either a broken heart or too much whiskey.' And *Cashbox* added that 'he suffered the most, and was perhaps singled out for alleged wrongs that had become a business way of life for many others.' BILL MILLAR

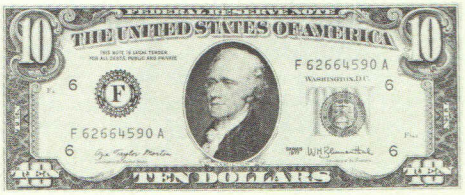
DJs IN BRIBES SHOCK!

The payola scandal rocked the US music business

Freed claps out the beat on his 1957 ABC-TV show. Sadly, fate and the payola investigations were to permit him only two more years at the top.

FROM NOVEMBER 1959 to late in 1960, the world of American popular music was shaken by the scandal of payola – that is, the practice of bribing disc jockeys to play certain records on their television or radio shows. And the events surrounding the official investigations highlighted one of the central stories of rock during the mid to late Fifties: how the music pushed its way into the existing commercial world on a national scale.

At the heart of the payola scandal were the institutionalised investigations of four bodies; three of them were part of the Federal Government and one was from New York State. In Washington, the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight of the Committee on Interstate and



Foreign Commerce, which since 1958 had been investigating allegations of rigged television quiz shows, had its attention drawn to allegations of commercial bribery in radio programming in November 1959. It began its hearings on this subject in February 1960, and the first series concluded on 19 February. Further hearings took place from 24 April to 3 May.

The Subcommittee's findings were that 263,000 dollars had been given by record companies to DJs in 42 cities, and that over 255 DJs had accepted money (there were probably 10,000 DJs at work in the United States at the time). This Subcommittee was acting mainly to gather information; it had no right to prosecute. But as it began to decide on its course of action late in 1959, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) itself warned that radio stations that allowed payola might lose their licence.

This announcement caused a rush of activity against payola by the radio stations themselves, particularly amongst the larger businesses such as the American Broadcasting Association. Then, on 3 December, the FCC requested all radio and television stations (some 5000 in all) to send any evidence of payola to the Subcommittee.

Early in December 1959, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) accused three

record manufacturers (RCA Victor, London and Cameo-Parkway) and some record distributors of restricting competition by making payments to DJs; this move added to the panic in the industry. But by August 1960, all these charges had been dropped; the FTC considered that legislative changes were a more effective means of countering payola.

Meanwhile, in New York State, a separate, parallel, series of investigations was being mounted by Assistant District Attorney Joseph Stone with a Grand Jury. New York had a commercial bribery law it could use against individuals or organisations, and the Grand Jury began its deliberations on 2 February 1960. On 19 May this jury charged eight men – including Alan Freed – with having accepted a total of 116,580 dollars in bribes. Freed was eventually brought to trial in December 1962; he received a six-month suspended sentence and a 300-dollar fine.

These official investigations were studiously correct, and the published findings went no further than watertight evidence would allow. The only far-reaching effect they had lay in amendments to the Federal Communications Act; these new clauses made it illegal to give presents or cash payments in exchange for airplay and held the radio stations, rather than employees, responsible for illegalities.

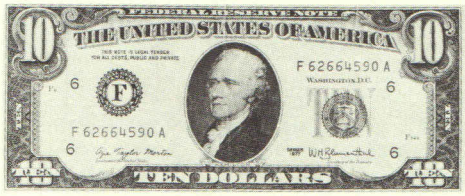
Behind the investigation

The bare bones of the official investigation were, however, merely a small part of the whole. The payola scandal opened up the popular music industry to internal and external scrutiny. This brought out many of the less pleasant but nonetheless intrinsic aspects of the world of which rock was a part and highlighted the problem of producing an art form in a market place that could be manipulated by a few powerful organisations.

The vast majority of DJs who lost their jobs were not prosecuted; they were disposed of by the radio stations in the wake of investigation by the central government. The National Council of Disc Jockeys had protested about the initial federal investigations, but to no avail. The big companies, under the threat of prosecution, mounted their own clean-up campaign late in 1959. ABC, for example, sent its employees an affidavit to sign (Alan Freed refused), while the Storer Broadcasting Company announced it was investigating payola in the nine cities from which its radio or TV stations broadcast. From this time, many a DJ's broadcasting days were numbered. Some DJs tried to fight back: at WCMS in Norfolk, Virginia, four DJs played one tune, 'Pahalacka', 320 times in one day to prove that constant airplay could not make a hit. All four of the broadcasters involved were fired.

Oiling the wheels

The official examination of payola also showed in detail how the music industry worked in conjunction with broadcasting and how the wheels of commerce were



oiled in the Fifties. The object of the radio and TV stations, record companies and the distributors was to make money. A record was (and is) good if it sold well; that was the only objective criterion all could understand.

The problem of corruption was complicated by the fact that most DJs did not find payola at all exceptional. Radio station manager Jack LeGraff of WJBK said that as far as he was concerned payola was normal business practice (he was fired for accepting bribes). DJs said that they had accepted gifts but swore that this had not really affected their judgement on what records to play. The Mercury record label gave Joe Finan of KYW Cleveland 50 dollars per week; but Finan claimed that his independence was in no way affected by this. The practice was merely part of the business, and did not have a specific effect.

Taken in isolation, the claims of DJs that a regular retainer from a record company did not constitute any pressure on them seem preposterous. But, in fact, any examination of American recording and broadcasting during the mid and late Fifties throws up a whole network of interlocking commercial circuits, in which agreements would be made that cut down on ostensible freedom of the market: from the minor level of record producers and DJs being given songwriting credits to the larger one of price-fixing agreements on advertising rates between the major networks.

Corruption in high places

The body designed to regulate and correct these uses and abuses of broadcasting – the Federal Communications Commission – was itself mixed up in these practices. A New York University Professor, Bernard Schwartz, had been asked to conduct an investigation into Federal regulatory agencies in 1957. Some of his findings were extremely disturbing. Oren Harris, the chairman of the subcommittee which investigated payola in 1960, had a 25 per cent share in a television station in Arkansas. The chairman of the FCC had been on holiday with corporation boss George Storer, but was obliged to resign when this was made public.

Payola, as the giving of presents and cash to DJs and radio stations, was merely one part of a larger structure in which a general bending of rules was accepted practice, and in which the individuals in any one segment would have been astonished to have been told they were corrupt.

Left: New York disc jockey Martin Block (left) with his programme director, after signing the affidavit swearing his innocence over taking payola bribes. Below left: Dick Clark, the host of 'American Bandstand'. Below: Alan Freed leaves radio WABC after his contract had been terminated 'by mutual agreement' – a statement few believed.

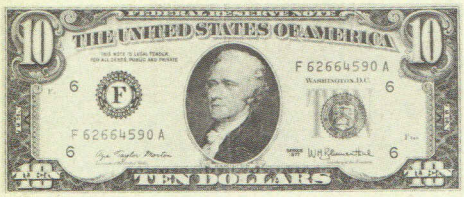
But there were good reasons why attention should have been focused on such a small area of corruption as radio play for records. For it was here that the possibility of large profits coincided with major conflicts within the industry.

Radio play was absolutely vital for the success of a record; and record sales were the basis of profitability. In industry terms, exposure to mass audiences (on shows such as Dick Clark's 'American Bandstand' or one of Alan Freed's radio spots) was one of the best guarantees of success. Profits in the record industry – especially for the major companies, with their large overheads – came from a few big sellers. In the two years before he went into the Army, it was claimed that Elvis Presley earned RCA well over 50 per cent of their profits. This kind of return was what everyone was aiming for, and radio play was essential to achieve it.

The pursuit of such profits led to two critical areas of conflict, one general and one specific.

The independent threat

The general conflict was between the major companies and the independents. The independent labels had their ears much more closely attuned to what rock was and what was going to appeal to the nation's youth; but the majors had more



sales outlets and better publicity. It was natural that record companies should use what means they could to get exposure for their artists' releases.

The independents' way was the offering of presents or cash to sweeten a station or DJ. And as the DJ might well have played the records in any case, there did not seem any real bribery involved. But there is no doubt that payola spread with frightening rapidity in the mid Fifties, as the small record labels saw their chances of expansion in the rock'n'roll boom. Tom Clay of WJBK Detroit admitted he had taken 6000 dollars, all from small companies, in the two years before 1960, to give but one example.

As more 'indies' sprang up competition became fiercer. How to attract the ear of Alan Freed, who might be sent 500 singles a week? The new or small company had to find a way of making its impact felt. Bernard Lowe of Cameo/Parkway records gave the House Subcommittee the clearest statement of this dilemma when he described how he paid 1000 dollars to Peter Tripp of WMGM because before that Tripp 'just wasn't getting my records played over there'. In 1955, an NBC internal memo had expressed concern at the possibilities of publicity about 'the growing payola enterprise in our industry'. By the late Fifties, payola was undoubtedly growing even faster; Cincinatti and Philadelphia were notorious, in particular, and revelations by Cincinatti record distributors about the scale of payments to DJs was one of the crucial early pieces of information which spurred on the payola investigation.

If the indies fuelled the fires of payola by such direct methods, the majors were more indirect. Many of them were directly or indirectly attached to radio stations which would publicise their products, but they were just as interested in influencing other stations via distributors. Joe Finan of KYW Cleveland was paid 1300 dollars from RCA's local distributor, and 200 dollars per month from RCA itself.

ASCAP versus BMI

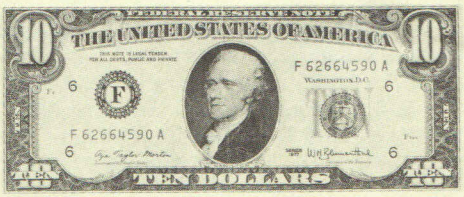
Competition and conflict for airtime between record companies was, then, a general area of conflict. But there was also a specific area of conflict which brought radio payola to the public eye. This was the continuing dispute between ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Artists and Publishers) and BMI (Broadcast Music International). ASCAP, formed in the early years of the century by music publishers, (partly to protect sales of sheet music) had never accustomed itself to radio plays of recorded music.

In 1940, in response to ASCAP's decision to raise royalty rates, BMI was formed by the broadcasters. At first, ASCAP was hardly worried; it controlled the major songwriters – the Gershwins, for example – and the lucrative film industry, while BMI operated on the margins of regional and black music. But by the mid Fifties, BMI's rhythm and blues and country and western songs were the basis of the new music – rock'n'roll – which was sweeping the country. And BMI had introduced new, aggressive tactics in the war between the publishing corporations; it paid lavish advances and pushed hard to get its songs played on the air; ASCAP claimed bribery and corruption, but to no avail until 1959. The actual letters and supporting evidence making formal and detailed allegations of payola in radio were delivered to the Harris Subcommittee by an ASCAP songwriter.

Why was ASCAP so outraged at BMI (and also the music it stood for)? One reason was undoubtedly commercial – by the mid Fifties, some stations were playing BMI songs for as much as 80 per cent of their music time, and ASCAP could see its share of the royalties diminishing.

But the BMI-ASCAP conflict was linked to a broader aspect of payola. Attached to the commercial conflicts was the attitude of the US establishment to rock music. ASCAP saw itself as the guardian of a public and musical morality which BMI was hell-bent on destroying.

Conservative America – the political establishment of the Eisenhower years – agreed with those sentiments. Without there being any real conspiracy, the payola scandal seems to have been an almost inevitable backlash against the success of rock. Rock'n'roll had created its own grease to oil the wheels of commerce in a money society; but large sections of this society did not like rock, and therefore reacted against these practices (conveniently ignoring the corruption outside this limited sphere).



Nowhere was this unconsciously hypocritical approach seen more clearly than in the different treatments of Dick Clark and Alan Freed. Dick Clark was the most important single DJ in the USA when the scandal broke; there is no doubt that his holdings in 33 music companies whose products he helped sell on his show, were a dubious set of outside interests. It is also plain that he received many gifts. But as soon as his employer, ABC, ordered all outside music-related business interests to be dropped, and sent round an anti-payola affidavit for all personnel to sign, he sold his holdings in the companies, and used the power of his position to negotiate with ABC to sign a milder affidavit that his own lawyer drew up.

Rock'n'roll businessman

When he appeared before the House Subcommittee, Clark's description of himself was what the members felt most sympathy with: a young businessman who may have sailed close to the wind but was part of the same system that they were involved in. He presented no threat; he was one of them; to him, rock'n'roll was merely one of his business interests.

In 1959, Alan Freed was working for ABC too. He refused, however, to sign the affidavit the company sent round in November; he insisted that the two 'establishment' DJs, Dick Clark and Martin Block, must do so before him.

In many ways, Freed's stand against the payola investigation, his defiant assertion that he had no charges to answer, his conviction in 1962 and his death in 1965 made him appear the symbol of how the early growth of rock'n'roll was being resisted by the established powers in the business. Dick Clark's continued success, on the other hand, seemed to show how rock could be tamed, laundered and made acceptable to the industry as a whole; a situation that would exist until the arrival of the Beatles.

Payola was part of the growing pains of rock; the new music had to find its commercial as well as artistic and social place in American society. In the process it had pushed into dangerous, turbulent waters.

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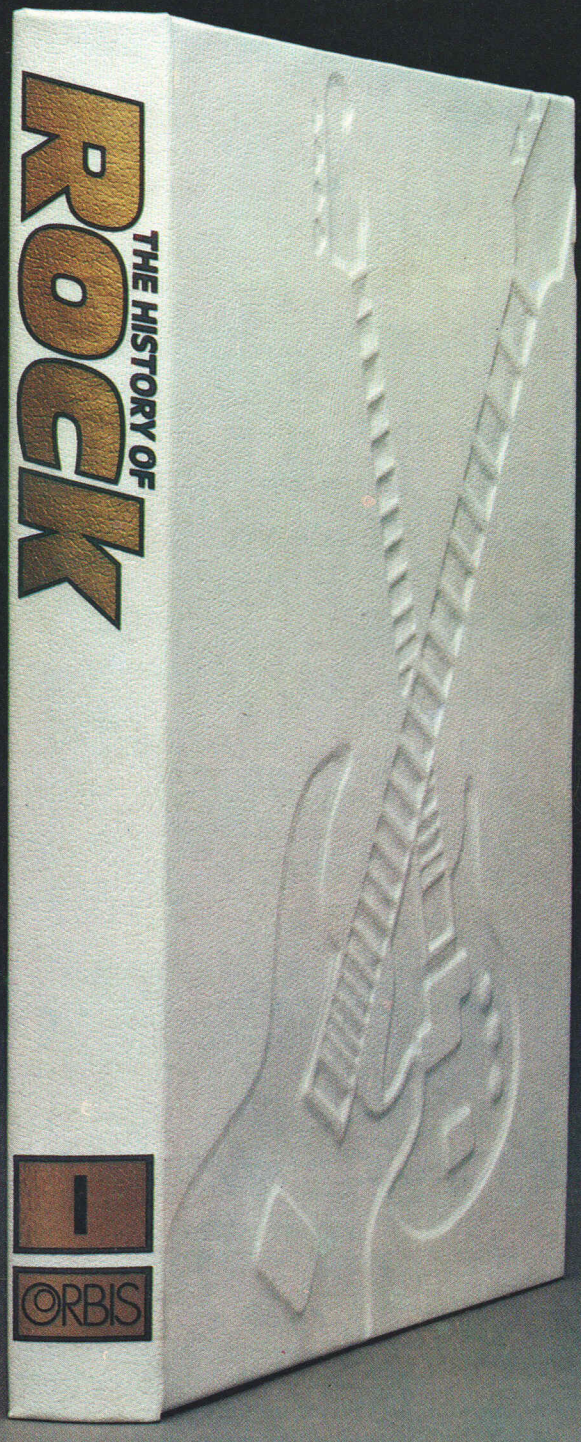

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